

THE COMPANY MAN

Ellen Goodman

He worked himself to death, finally and precisely, at 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning. The obituary didn't say that, of course. It said that he died of a coronary thrombosis—I think that was it—but everyone among his friends and acquaintances knew it instantly. He was a perfect Type A, a workaholic, a classic they said to each other and shook their heads—and thought for five or ten minutes about the way they lived. This man who worked himself to death finally and precisely at 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning—on his day off—was fifty-one years old and a vice-president. He was, however, one of six vice-presidents, and one of three who might conceivably—if the president died or retired soon enough—have moved to the top spot. Phil knew that. He worked six days a week, five of them until eight or nine at night, during a time when his own company had begun the four day week for everyone but the executives. He worked like the Important People. He had no outside 'extracurricular interests,' unless, of course, you think about a monthly golf game that way. To Phil, it was work. He always ate egg salad sandwiches at his desk. He was, of course, overweight, by 20 or 25 pounds. He thought it was okay, though, because he did not smoke. On Saturdays, Phil wore a sports jacket to the office instead of a suit, because it was the weekend. He had a lot of people working for him, maybe sixty, and most of them liked him most of the time. Three of them will be seriously considered for his job. The obituary didn't mention that. But it did list his 'survivors' quite accurately. He is survived by his wife, Helen, forty-eight years old, a good woman of no particular marketable skills, who worked in an office before marrying and mothering. She had, according to her daughter, given up trying to compete with his work years ago, when the children were small. A company friend said, "I know how much you will miss him." And she answered "I already have." "Missing him all these years," she must have given up part of herself which had cared too much for the man. She would be "well taken care of." His "dearly beloved" eldest of the "dearly beloved" children is a hard-working executive in a manufacturing firm down South. In the day and a half before the funeral, he went around the neighborhood researching his father, asking the neighbors what he was like. They were embarrassed. His second child is a girl, who is twenty-four and newly married. She lives near her mother and they are close, but whenever she was alone with her father, in a car driving somewhere, they had nothing to say to each other. The youngest is twenty, a boy, a high-school graduate who has spent the last couple of years, like a lot of his friends, doing enough odd jobs to stay in grass and food. He was the one who tried to grab at his father and tried to mean enough to him to keep the man at home. He was his father's favorite. Over the last two years, Phil stayed up nights worrying about the boy. The boy once said, "My father and I only board here." At the funeral, the sixty-year-old company president told the forty-eight-year-old widow that the fifty-one-year-old deceased had meant much to the company and would be missed and would be hard to replace. The widow didn't look him in the eye. She was afraid he would read her bitterness and, after all, she needed him to straighten out the finances—the stock options and all that. Phil was overweight and nervous and worked too hard. If he was not at the office, he was worried about it. Phil was a type A, a heart-attack natural. You could have picked him out of a lineup in a minute. So when he finally worked himself to death, at precisely 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning, no one was really surprised. By 5:00 P.M. the afternoon of the funeral, the company president had begun, discreetly of course, with care and taste, to make inquiries about his replacement, one of three men. He asked around: "Who's been working the hardest?"

A little old saying, the perfect [wage] slave is one who says, "I am not a slave."